

# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

## Lloyd Jones, *A History of Silence* (Text, 2013)

Writing a memoir seems to be a routine step in the career of many transnationally acclaimed writers. The New Zealand author Lloyd Jones, for example, has recently come to the genre of memoir after publishing more than ten books, including some novels which have been translated into many diverse languages, such as *Book of Fame* (2000) or *Mr. Pip* (2006). *A History of Silence* (2013), however, is far more surprising than the simple accomplishment of a routine task. In fact, this is a text which escapes any easy definition: it also includes, for instance, a thorough reflection about the earthquake which devastated Christchurch on 22 February 2011, but it is not in any way an instant book about the recent catastrophe. Jones aims at a broader goal, which is eventually revealed by the very last quotation of the book, taken from Joseph Brodskij's collection of essays *On Grief and Reason* (1995): 'If art teaches us anything, it is the privateness of the human condition.'

*A History of Silence* fully shares Brodskij's ambition: by blending his own family history with the narration of the earthquake, Jones manages to build a unique 'history of silence', establishing many interesting connections between the two narratives and providing them with further elaboration. According to the author, indeed, both his personal family story and New Zealand national history show the 'gaps and fissures' (40) of silence, as they have grown 'out of a deliberate forgetting of what [they] sat on' (37).

More specifically, the gaps in the history of Christchurch emerged when, after the earthquake, the city faced the problem of soil liquefaction, due to the fact that urban development – principally based, as the author repeatedly recalls, on the massive use of concrete – did not take into account Christchurch's 'wetland history' (23). Also, Jones's family history is shown to be heavily influenced by forgetfulness, as the author states that for many years his knowledge of his family past has not gone beyond the biographies of his own parents.

Given these premises, the 2011 earthquake triggers an enquiry both in the history of Jones's own family and in the national past of New Zealand. Initially, the author seems driven by a feeling that might be even labelled as 'wishful thinking': 'I felt that all I had to do was identify the unacknowledged events of the past and history would be visible' (88). The quest for truth, however, might be misleading, as family stories are often based on invented tales, as the author eventually admits (181). At the end of the book, Jones eventually gets to a slightly different conclusion, which emphasizes awareness over truth: 'This is what it is like to acquire history. You become knowledgeable about things you never expected' (268).

Among the unexpected findings of the author's quest, there is the disclosure of his grandmother's story, previously marked by oblivion for her bad reputation as a 'fallen woman' (194). Maud's story, in fact, closely recalls the plot of Nathanael Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), showing the existence of deep analogies between the Victorian culture of white settlers in New Zealand and the cultural legacies of Puritanism in the United States. Once again, this comparison insists on the impossibility to consider the author's family history without reflecting also on the national history and culture: to use one of Jones' most brilliant expressions, family and national histories are 'worlds within worlds' (57).

The birth of Maud's 'bastard' daughter is related, then, to the idea of New Zealand white settler culture as 'bastard civilization', which 'rises on its own conceit as "self-made"'. It is as singular as a plant in the desert – luminously present and ducking all questions as to how it came to be there, apparently self-seeding and self-sustaining because there is no other clue to what sprouted it' (230).

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What might seem, at first glance, a harsh criticism of New Zealand history and culture should be actually nuanced by the author's personal involvement in the same process of 'bastardization'. Acknowledging that 'the bastard is the godfather of the outsider' (229), Jones explores the creation of marginality within New Zealand settler culture – affecting, for example, his grandmother because of her 'deviant' sexual and family life – as related to the marginality felt by the same New Zealand settlers in relation to the former metropolitan centre. In other words, the failure of the project to build 'another England' (93) at the antipodes was still haunting New Zealand at the times of Jones's grandmother, making New Zealand society even 'more Victorian' than Victorian England. The same troubled relationship with the former metropolitan centre also resurfaces when the author makes reference to the encounter between white settlers and the Maori population: though seldom central to Jones's poetics, this issue often emerges between the lines of his books, as a constant reminder of another huge silence in New Zealand national history.

At the end of the book, Jones manages to restore the memory of his grandmother, rewriting, thus, part of New Zealand cultural history. Visiting his grandmother's grave, he completes a work of mourning that his parents were not able to accomplish. In this process, the role of the earthquake appears to be decisive: symbolically, it has shaken many foundations – 'texture, language, heritage, entitlement' (40), as the author aptly reminds – but it has also prompted Jones to look for his own roots. The discovery that 'roots are hell to deal with' (65) eventually turns out to be less negative than expected, fulfilling, instead, the purposes of the literary topos of the descent to hell. Interweaving 'worlds within worlds', Lloyd Jones shows, once again, that one needs to pass through hell – be it a devastating earthquake or a silenced family past – in order to acquire a new knowledge of one's own history and culture

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